

Three-Part Oral Reading Practice for Large Groups

By Mary E. Farrell (Spain)

Large-up to 40 plus-energetic and mixed- ability classes at the secondary level more often than not produce more noise in their first language(s) than in the foreign language to be learned at school. A pedagogical strategy that incorporates class management is usually welcomed by the teacher who has a number of such groups. Over the years I have developed such a system, which, while never 100 percent perfect, is fairly effective.

The aim is threefold: pronunciation and intonation practice, reading for understanding, and making a brief statement or résumé of what has been read. The materials consist of an index card with the student's name and, if possible, a photograph, plus a graded reader for each student or trio of students. An essential aid is a bilingual dictionary for class use during the exercise or, even better, several small bilingual dictionaries that can be placed at different points in the classroom for easy consultation.

Procedure

With the actors and props ready, the class can begin. Either a student or the teacher shuffles the index cards, then selects randomly a group of three. The group chosen will work as a trio on a paragraph selected from the reader by the teacher. One student will read aloud, a second will translate the paragraph, and the third will make a résumé of the brief text in his or her own words. Since the groups are formed randomly, the members of the class keep alert to what is being said and read so that they will be ready when their turn comes. Final assessment will be based in part on their performance in this kind of task. Therefore, everyone who wants to learn has the quiet to do so while the teacher helps with kinky pronunciation problems or interference from the mother tongue(s).

Reading aloud has the benefit of practicing the gymnastics of the language with the teacher as coach; the students who are not performing pick up information as well. For Spanish/Catalan readers such as mine, the digraph -ed frequently presents problems-is it /id/, /d/, or /t/? Question intonation is another area where work is usually needed. While this oral practice is taking place, the student who is reading aloud does not have to worry about complete understanding of the text. He or she can concentrate on the music, so to speak. The second member of the group, in the meantime, goes along preparing his or her translation of the paragraph, a translation aimed to check meaning rather than the production of an artistic rendering of the English text. This part of the exercise shows where the difficulties lie. One of the major difficulties is detecting the maverick particles of phrasal or prepositional-phrasal verbs; another, the confusion of false friends. Other difficulties also come to the fore, and this is a good time to clear them up by helping the students train themselves to be aware of certain types of errors. Ease in detecting similarities that can be helpful in figuring out meaning can also be developed. Through this

check-point translation system a feeling for verb tenses, which often provide surprises-such as overlapping concepts of time between one language and another-can be pointed out.

The third part of this technique focuses on making a résumé. This task also provides carryover to and from other subjects in the secondary-school curriculum, giving it extra value for the student. Here the objective is to sum up a very short paragraph into an even shorter version without repeating the words as they appear in the text. This version is normally just a sentence; nevertheless, it is tricky to manage in the new language and provides a mini-challenge. So, while the translation is going on out loud, the last student to perform is preparing his summary statement.

Scheme and Variation

Each group's performance takes about five to seven minutes. When it is over, another follows, and so on throughout the class period. Finishing a reader usually takes one class hour a week over a period of five or six weeks. This hour is assigned to a certain day and time each week. The class brings only the reader, not the class textbook; therefore, the reading day provides a minor change in routine, which is appreciated. For a simple variation in procedure, it is useful to have a reading hour with a buzz to it. The trios are chosen and set to work in groups to comment on the text, look up words together, and generally help each other get the meaning. During this type of session, the students have the option of calling the teacher over for individual consultation on any problem encountered, or just to see if the group is on the right track in understanding what they are reading.

Assessment

When the assigned reader is finished, a day is set for testing the performance of reading aloud with acceptable skill, giving a meaning-check translation, and making an adequate summary of the material read. Since a mark is given for this tripartite performance, the student must handle all three parts on his or her own. This mark counts as a third of the final evaluation, so the reader must be carefully and thoughtfully studied for a high mark. If the student has paid attention in class, a passing grade is likely. Thus, the probability of having an attentive classroom atmosphere during the practice sessions is high. Eventually everyone gets something out of the exercise, even if only snatches of pronunciation, intonation, and detective techniques for future reading alone.

Result

Once the class as a whole catches on, this system takes hold in the scheme of learning oral skills. It helps in the students' other language(s), for it aids them in gaining confidence in speaking in front of their classmates; it develops habits of handling their own language with care as they come to examine it from the translator's point of reference, and it helps them to pay attention with an eye to making summaries of what has been read or heard. This type of class activity

allows interested learners to soak up eagerly every possible element of the target language, at the same time allowing for passive learning by just being there.